



Perceptions and Realities **Game and Fish Surveys** **Provide Insight into** **Current Issues**

Story and Photos by Craig Bihrlé

Question: How much private land in North Dakota's best hunting regions is "posted" to hunting without permission?

Answer: It depends on who is asked, in which region the land is located, and for what type of hunting.

Question: If private land is posted, is it still accessible to hunters?

Answer: It depends on who is asked, in which region the land is located, and for what type of hunting.

Ask one hunter and one landowner these questions and the answers could mirror each other or vary considerably. Ask hundreds of hunters and landowners and the answers are a much more reliable snapshot of what's going on in the countryside each fall.

Finding such answers is common practice for the state's hunting, fishing and wildlife management agency. Annual surveys are a major endeavor. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department routinely asks hunters and anglers how much and where they hunt and fish, and how many and what type of animals or fish they take. That's in addition to yearly animal and fish population surveys, the information from which biologists use to answer questions on health of game and fish populations.

Every so often there is a need to know more, to go beyond annual harvests and populations and thoroughly tap the minds of people who spend time in North Dakota's outdoors. Over the past 18 months, Game and Fish has asked a lot of extra questions.

Many of these questions were part of two major surveys that Game and Fish conducts periodically to gauge changes – in hunter attitudes and issues, and in hunter and angler expenditures. They come along about every five years and provide a wealth of information that is used not only to guide management, but also to find out if prevailing perception matches what people are really thinking.

Together, the final reports generated from the hunter issues survey, and hunter and angler expenditure study, weigh almost 11 pounds, contain more than a ream of paper, and provide a benchmark for some of the assumptions made by Game and Fish staff and North Dakota citizens, and nonresidents who come to North Dakota to hunt or fish.

"We use studies like these," says Roger Rostvet, the Game and Fish Department's Deputy Director, "to help focus our management activities to a particular area."

A good example of that, which came from a hunter issues survey based on the 1996 hunting season, is the direction of the Department's Private Land Open To Sportsmen program, developed for the first time for the 1997 hunting season. From

that 1996 study, Rostvet said, Department managers knew that people wanted to hunt pheasants in southwestern North Dakota, and they also knew hunters were having trouble getting access in that area. In response, the PLOTS program was initially directed at developing habitat-based access in the southwest.

The 2001 study also directed considerable effort toward finding out hunter, commercial interest and landowner attitudes, opinions and experiences regarding access.

"I think it will have a lot of merit as we deal with hunter management in the future," Rostvet said. "One of the things we learned from this is that yes, it's getting more difficult to hunt. That's the perception. People, both residents and nonresidents, are very concerned and they know things are changing."

"But it appears from this study that access is still more attainable than what the perception is. There's more posted land, and more landowners are charging fees, but hunters are still finding places to go."

On many other issues, perception and reality are the same. Sometimes, the two are far apart. Game and Fish administrators need to differentiate between fact and anecdote in order to make responsible decisions. Agency planner Arlen Harmoning says surveys are "a way to gather the types of information used to make decisions."

Questions are designed to anticipate future problems or issues. "So when it comes time to make decisions, the agency doesn't have to go out and do a survey," Harmoning said.

While public attitudes and opinions are one element, Harmoning added, biological considerations are also important, and sometimes overriding. That's why the Department needs both wildlife and human information.

Surveys are also designed to provide data that can help drive the Game and Fish budget process, so dollars are efficiently directed at the right programs.

Following are summaries of the issues and expenditure surveys, some highlights, and a few comparisons of perceptions and realities discovered when a broad spectrum of people were asked for input.

THE HUNTING ISSUES STUDY

The Game and Fish Department, with cooperation from Governor Hoeven's office, the Legislative Council, Commerce Department and Tourism Department, contracted with Winkelman Consulting of Fargo to conduct hunter issues research based on the 2001 hunting season. Previous similar studies were conducted based on the 1991 and 1996 hunting seasons.

Resident and nonresident hunters, landowners, and hunting guides and other economic interests were surveyed by phone in May-July 2002.

Note: In previous surveys, landowners in all state counties were included in the random sample. The population for this study included only those landowners in counties with heavy bird harvests. Hunter and economic interest information was also directed at the counties listed below:

Pheasant counties: Prime – Grant, Hettinger, Mercer, Morton, Sargent and Stark. Good – Adams, Burleigh, Dickey, Divide, McIntosh, McLean, Oliver, Ransom and Slope.

Duck counties: Prime – Burleigh, Eddy, Nelson, Ramsey, Sargent and Steele. Good – Kidder, LaMoure, Logan, McLean, Richland, Rolette, Sheridan, Stutsman, Towner and Walsh.

Goose counties: Prime – McLean, Nelson, Ramsey, Renville, Sargent and Towner. Good – Benson, Bottineau, Burleigh, Cavalier, Foster, Kidder, Pierce, Richland, Steele, Stutsman and Walsh.

Perceptions and Realities on Hunting Issues

Perception

More North Dakota private land than ever is "posted."

Reality

More landowners are posting at least part of their property compared to five years ago. The proportion of landowners who reported they posted at least some of their land in 2001 was 68.7 percent, up from 59.8 percent in 1996 and 61.4 percent in 1992. In the pheasant counties, 82.8 percent reported posting land in 2001. In duck and goose counties, the proportion of landowners who posted in 2001 was 64.5 and 64.3 percent, respectively. That compares to 59.2 percent of landowners posting in "waterfowl" counties in 1996.

Perception

All the good land is posted.

Reality

Landowners do post a greater proportion of their Conservation Reserve Program grasslands, where much pheasant hunting takes place, than they do other parts of their farms. In all counties surveyed, about 60 percent of landowners surveyed said they post three-fourths or more of their CRP – 52 percent reported posting all their CRP land. In pheasant counties, 69.5 percent of landowners posted more than three-fourths of their CRP.

On the other hand, in all counties 28.3 percent of landowners said they didn't post any of their CRP.

Perception

The amount of leased land or land available only for fee hunting only has increased significantly.

Reality

Looking at percentages only, this is true. The proportion of landowners who indicated they leased hunting rights to some of their land increased by more than 500 percent over 1996; for fee hunting the increase was more than 400 percent. By actual numbers, however, only 2.2 percent of all landowners surveyed said they leased hunting rights and 2.5 percent said they charged a fee during 2001, compared to 0.4 and 0.6 percent, respectively, in 1996.

Perception

Reducing the number of nonresident hunters would negatively affect many landowners who depend on fee hunting or leasing as part of their annual income.

Reality

Less than 5 percent of landowners surveyed indicated they had received any kind of income in 2001 from hunting-related fees or services. Additionally, 55 percent of landowners, as well as 63 percent of resident hunters and 53 percent of nonresident hunters, said they were philosophically opposed to charging hunters for access. Two of every 10 hunters, both resident and nonresident, indicated they would be willing to pay for access to prime hunting land.

Perception

It is getting harder to gain permission to hunt on private land.

Reality

While most resident and nonresident hunters – around 70 percent – feel the amount of posted land has increased in the last five years, a majority of resident and nonresident hunters are at least somewhat satisfied with the ease of finding private land on which they can hunt. Nearly 80 percent of landowners in pheasant counties said they grant permission to hunt at least half the time they are asked. In duck and goose counties, the proportion of landowners who say they grant permission at least half the times they are asked approaches 90 percent.

Roughly one in every four residents and nonresidents said that in 2001, at least one landowner whom had previously given them free hunting access no longer allowed them to hunt.

Perception

Nonresident hunters are responsible for a proliferation of fee hunting, leasing, guides and outfitters, and land purchased for hunting purposes.

Reality

Only about 8 percent of nonresidents said they used a guide, outfitter or bed and breakfast to gain access to hunting land in 2001; about 13 percent had ever used one of these services, compared to 3.1 percent of resident hunters surveyed.

Perception

A good share of nonresident hunters who come to North Dakota are former residents who are coming back to hunt with relatives or friends.

Reality

About 20 percent of nonresidents said they hunted with a North Dakota resident relative in 2001, while about one in four nonresidents surveyed have ever hunted in North Dakota with a resident relative. Seventy-five percent of nonresidents have never hunted with a resident relative. Nearly 22 percent of nonresidents surveyed said they hunted in North Dakota for the first time in 2001, while another 35 percent had never hunted here before the previous five years.

Perception

Hunters, through license dollars and excise taxes on equipment, already support, and are willing to increase financial support for programs that provide more places to hunt and more habitat that wildlife needs to thrive.

Reality

Seven of every 10 resident and nonresident hunters are willing to pay higher fees to fund habitat and access programs. Less than three of every 10 guides and outfitters said they would be willing to pay more for habitat and access programs.

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Reasons for Posting Land

Landowners who posted some or all of their land during the 2001 hunting season were asked what made them decide to post their land. Reasons for posting land include saving the land for family, friends, and regulars to hunt (31 percent); just to know who is hunting, where they are hunting, or just want them to ask (28 percent); followed by protection of livestock or crops (15 percent), and protection of farmstead, buildings, or family (13 percent). Less than 10 percent of landowners reported they did not allow any type of hunting.

Landowners who did not post all of their land during the 2001 hunting season were asked what made them decide not to post all of their land. The most frequently given reasons for not posting all of their land include they never post, have no game, no habitat, or don't care (30 percent); want hunters, don't mind hunters, or want game population reduced (30 percent); not near farmstead or buildings (13 percent), and don't have time to post or it's a hassle (12 percent).

Amount of Land Controlled by Guides and Lodging Providers

Based on the small number of respondents surveyed for this study, the "average" guide controls as many as 15,886 acres while the average lodging provider controls as many as 5,543 acres.

Hunter Satisfaction

Despite the concerns related to access and posting, the vast majority of hunters are still satisfied with the overall quality of hunting in North Dakota.

Fewer Duck Hunters

One out of three resident hunters said they did not hunt waterfowl in 2001, but had in some previous year. The reason most often provided was that it takes too much time (32.5 percent). Most of the other reasons given related to personal issues, not access issues.

Satisfaction with Public Land

A majority of hunters are satisfied with the amount of public land and Private Land Open To Sportsmen land that provides good hunting.

What Attracts Nonresident Hunters to North Dakota

Nonresident hunters were asked to list some of the reasons why they hunted in North Dakota. The most frequent reasons given include quality of hunting, lots of game, variety of species; family/relatives live in North Dakota; hunt with North Dakota relatives or friends; ease of access or amount of public land; the friendly people; and good past experiences.

Nonresident hunters typically express higher satisfaction with their experience than do resident hunters. This may result, in part, from the fact that they may have lower expectations, according to the surveys' authors.

THE ECONOMIC EXPENDITURE SURVEY

More than 80 percent of all money spent on hunting and fishing in rural areas of North Dakota is contributed by state residents, according to the "Resident and Nonresident Hunter and Angler Expenditure Characteristics and Economic Effects, North Dakota 2001-2002."

The report, completed in January 2003 by the Department of Agribusiness and Applied Economics at North Dakota State University, tracked hunter and angler expenditures for the 2001-02 seasons, and is similar to other studies conducted approximately every five years since the late 1970s. The Game and Fish Department uses the information to identify trends in hunting and fishing activities by comparing current information with previous studies, Harmoning said.

Overall, hunters and anglers spent \$468.5 million dollars in North Dakota during 2001, on equipment, vehicles, boats, travel, lodging, food and many other items (this figure does not include licenses). Authors Dean A. Bangsund and F. Larry Leistritz of NDSU attribute a combination of more participants, and greater per-person spending to a \$106 million increase in total spending related to hunting and fishing in North Dakota in 2001-02, compared to the previous survey period, 1996-97.

The authors state in the report's abstract that total spending by resident hunters and anglers increased by \$73 million, or 22 percent, while nonresident spending increased by \$33 million, or 101 percent.

Hunter expenditures increased by \$31 million, or 23 percent, while angler expenditures increased by \$75 million, or 33 percent, over the period.

The report provides a smorgasbord of statistics related to who spends what, where. The biggest spenders are resident anglers. Those who fish both on open water and through the ice averaged \$2,597 in expenses for the survey year, about twice as much as the average resident hunter.

Following is a sample of perceptions, realities and other noteworthy comparisons:

Perception

Nonresident hunters provide the bulk of outdoor recreation related spending in rural North Dakota.

Reality

While the proportion of spending by nonresidents increased, resident hunters and anglers by far contribute the most to North Dakota's economy. Of \$468.5 million in total spending by all hunters and anglers, resident hunter and angler expenditures were estimated at \$402.7 million (86 percent) and nonresident hunter and angler expenditures were estimated at \$65.9 million (14 percent). Hunting expenditures were estimated at \$166.4 million, and fishing expenditures at \$302.1 million. Total spending in rural areas was estimated at \$213.4 million by residents (78 percent) and \$48.4 million (22 percent) by nonresidents.

For hunting only, urban resident spending in rural areas of \$32.9 million outpaced all nonresident hunter spending of \$27.3 million.

Note: Money spent on hunting and fishing is an important economic factor in North Dakota. Money spent by nonresidents is "new" money to the state as a whole – money that likely would not be spent here if it weren't for the attractiveness of our outdoor opportunities.

Money spent by both residents and nonresidents in rural areas is "new" money to those rural areas – money that likely would not be spent there if not for hunting and fishing.

Perception

Nonresidents who come to North Dakota to hunt or fish are wealthier than the average North Dakotan.

Notes of Interest

- Resident special big game hunters (moose, elk and deer) had the highest daily expenditures of \$311 in 2001.
- In 2001-02 resident anglers spent \$60 million more than in 1996-97. Nonresident anglers upped their contributions by \$14.3 million.
- Spending by nonresident hunters increased by \$18.7 million between 1996-97 and 2001-02. Resident hunters spent \$12.2 million more.
- The number of nonresident small game (waterfowl and upland game) hunters more than doubled between the two survey periods, from 19,707 to 41,329. The number of resident upland game hunters increased by 3 percent – 51,021 in 1996-97 to 52,749 in 2001-02, while resident waterfowl hunter numbers declined by 9 percent – 38,627 in 1996-97 to 35,215 in 2001-02.
- Of the \$468.5 million in total expenditures in 2001-02, about \$262 million, or 55 percent, was spent in rural areas (communities of 2,500 population or less). Resident hunters spent \$75.3 million in rural areas, while resident anglers spent \$138.1 million. Nonresident anglers spent \$21.2 million in rural areas, while nonresident hunters spent \$27.3 million.
- The authors conclude the abstract by writing: "The economic importance of hunting and fishing in North Dakota has continued to increase throughout the 1990s, and continues to be an important source of economic activity in the state. However, policy decisions affecting wildlife management should not be based solely on economic information, and must balance the ever increasing demand for wildlife-related recreation with the supply of wildlife-related resources to ensure the continued economic benefits that abundant hunting and fishing opportunities provide to the state."

MORE INFO ON GAME AND FISH SURVEYS

Hunter and Angler Expenditures

A 24-page summary, as well as the full survey report, can be obtained free of charge by writing Carol Jensen, Department of Agribusiness and Applied Economics, North Dakota State University, P.O. Box 5636, Fargo, ND 58105-5636; phone 701-231-7441; fax 701-231-7400; or email cjensen@ndsuext.nodak.edu.

The report is also available on the Game and Fish Department's website at discovernd.com/gnf/info/hunt-fish-surv.html.

Hunter Issues Research

Executive summaries and full versions of the report are available on CD by writing Arlen Harmoning, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501; or email ndgf@state.nd.us.

Reality

About 50 percent of all resident hunters and anglers surveyed had household incomes of greater than \$50,000. About 70 percent of nonresident hunters and anglers had household incomes of greater than \$50,000.

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